



## THE IMAGINATION IN CHILDHOOD.

By Maria Montessori.

The belief is very common that the little child is characterized by a most vivid imagination, and that because of this a particular education should be brought to bear upon him in order to cultivate such a special gift of nature. His mentality differs from ours; he goes beyond our vigorous and restricted limits, and delights in wandering through the fascinating world of the unreal, as is the case among savages.

This infantile characteristic has also given rise to the generalization of other similar ideas now no longer held. Ontogeny resumes phylogeny—that is, the life of the individual reproduces the life of the species, and thus the life of civilization is reproduced in man, and therefore there are found in the little child psychic characteristics peculiar to savages. For this reason the child, like the savage, is fascinated by the fantastic, the supernatural, the unreal.

Rather than give utterance to similar flights of a scientific fantasy, it is simpler to note that an organic development of the mind of man is more distantly conceivable than that of savages less matured than our own, like that of savages. But, allowing those who interpret infantile mentality as the "savage state" to keep their beliefs, the objection can still be raised that in any case, this savage state being a passing state and one which has to be overcome, education must help the child to pass through this. It should not develop the savage state or hold the child back in it.

All the forms of imperfect development which we find in the child bear some resemblance to like characteristics in the savage. For example, in language: the poverty of the vocabulary, the existence of concrete expressions only, and the great number of words, so that they are used severally for many things and also to indicate different objects. The lack of modes in the verbs, because of which children use the infinitive only. But no one will say that "for this reason" we should artificialise the child back within the confines of such a primitive language, in order that he may easily pass through this prehistoric period. Though some people remain permanently in a state of imagination in which the unreal prevails, our children belong to a people whose mentality finds its delight in great works of art, in science, in literature, in the exact sciences. Such products of a superior imagination represent the environment in which our children's intellect should mould itself. It is natural that the child in the nebulous period of his mind should be attracted by fantastic ideas; but we must not because of this forget that it is our concern, the one who must outstrip us, and the least we can give him for such a purpose is the maximum of all there is at our disposal.

A form of imagination, which is held as primary to all, and almost universally recognized as creative imagination is that spontaneous work of the infant mind by which children attribute distinct characteristics to objects which do not possess them.

Who has not seen a child ride his back on his father's cane, switching as though mounted on a real horse? Behold a proof of imagination in the child! What pleasure children take in making a wonderful coach by putting chairs together, and while some stretch out inside joyously look at an imaginary landscape or greet an applauding crowd, others, perched on the back of the chair, whip the air as though driving fiery steeds? Again, proofs of imagination.

Let us observe, further, children, who possess delicate points and suddenly ride in a carriage or automobile. They sit down with a sense of disdain at the child running about, furiously whipping a cane; they would be astonished to see children so happy under the delusion that they were being carried along by stationary chairs. They would say of such children, "They are poor and do this because they have no horses or carriages." An adult becomes resigned, a child demands human sympathy, not a proof of imagination; it is the first step towards field dreams.

It is not an activity allied with gifts of nature; it is a manifestation of conscious noticeable poverty. No one certainly would maintain that it is necessary, in order to educate the poor child, to take away his chair, his cane, his car, and neither is it necessary to prevent the child from maintaining himself with his cane. If a poor man, a beggar, had only dry bread to eat and were to seat himself beside the man grating at a tin basement kitchen, because in minding the food he imagines that he is eating a sumptuous meal, the child, who would prevent him? Not so with our poor child, in order to develop the activities of the imagination of these more fortunate, for whom the real meals are destined, it is

necessary to deprive them of their meat and give bread and savoury soups.

A poor mother who loved her child very much gave him a piece of bread in a certain manner; she divided it into two parts, and gave them saying: "This is the bread, and this is meat." The child was satisfied, but in mother's desire to under-nourish her child in order to develop his imagination in this way. And yet I was asked in all seriousness if it would not have been harmful to give the use of the piano to a child who was constantly pretending to play the piano on a table. "Why should it be harmful?" asked L. "Because in that case he would, I suppose, learn music, but he would not be exercising his imagination, and I do not know whether the two is the most useful," was the reply.

Some of the Freebele games are based on little beliefs. The child is given a block and is told "This is a house." Then other blocks are arranged in a certain way, and he is told "This is a stable. Now let's put the horses in the stable." Then the blocks are arranged in still other ways. This is a tower; this other—the village church... And then the exercise (the objects) lead themselves even less to the illusion than in the case of a game used to teach the child at least does himself move about and whip the blocks. To make towers and churches out of the blocks which were first horses brings about the extreme of mental confusion. Furthermore, in this case it is not the child who "imagines spontaneously" and works with his own brain. He must picture for himself what the teacher tells him at that particular moment. Though he is not quiet, though he is about, and he cannot be made to move about, he nevertheless becomes more and more like that sort of cinematograph in which the teacher names in rapid succession, but which always is composed of images of things such like these. What is captured in this way in such immature minds? What do we find of a similar nature in the life of adults that will show us the definite results of educating the mind after this fashion? There are men who really mistake a tree for a thorn and give themselves kindly commands, and some believe they are God, because of false perceptions. In more serious forms "illusions" are the beginnings of fair reasoning, the concomitants of delirium. The insane create nothing, neither do those children who are condemned to the restrictions of an education which would unconsciously tend to develop their childish manifestations into vice—that is to say, manifestations of immaturity in normal development.

We are apt to think that we develop the child's imagination by giving him objects to believe that certain fantasies are true, as, for example, in Latin countries Christmas is personified by an ugly woman, "the Befana," who can see through walls, comes down the chimney, and brings toys to those children who have been good and leaves chcolate to those who were naughty. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, on the other hand, Christmas is an old man covered with snow, who carries an enormous load filled with toys for the children and comes into their homes at night. But, how is it possible for the child's imagination to be developed by that which is in truth the fruit of our imagination? If we allow him what we imagine, and not what they really are, we shall not imagine. Creativity is indeed a characteristic of the immature mind which is lacking in experience and in consciousness of realities where there is a want of an intellect which can distinguish the real from the unreal, the beautiful from the ugly, the possible from the impossible. Do we perchance wish to develop creativity in our children only because, in a stage where they are naturally ignorant and immature, they show themselves credulous? Certainly creativity may exist in an adult, but then it is not based on its products. Creativity germinates in the state of intellectual darkness, and we are glad to supersede that stage. We cite credulity as evidence of the lack of civilization. For instance, here is an anecdote of the seventeenth century:

"The 'Pant Nest' in Paris was the hangout of gambling places, where blindfolded the crowds were often to be found taking and quacks. Once a fakir was making his fortune by selling a Chinese almanac which would ensure the safety of his master in battle. He had a short nose or shorter a long one. Mr. De Sartine, head of police, arrested this fakir, and said to him, 'Master, how do you manage to attract such customers?' The fakir replied, 'Well, sir, my secret is that I always tell the truth.' 'What,' he replied, 'few savvy people do you think pass over the bridge in a day?' 'From ten to twelve thousand,' replied the De Sartine. 'Well, sir, how many of the savvies are there?' 'About one hundred,' answered the fakir. 'About one hundred,' said the De Sartine. 'I'll leave it at that, and I have the remaining nine thousand blindfolded men when I get my money.'

The difference in the situation from their own is ours; the fact that we have a greater number of intelligent people and fewer who are credulous. Hence education should

not follow the path toward credulity, but rather that of intelligence. The experience and maturity of the mind cause credulity to disappear little by little, and instruction is a help in this. Whether people or individuals, the evolution of civilization and of the mind, tends to the growth and development of credulity. War, however, is often an engine of credulity. War, in fact, is often an engine of credulity. In this wild, wild ignorance, fantasy easily wanders about, just because it lacks that support which permits of attaining greater heights. Thus the Pillars of Hercules disappeared when the Straits of Gibraltar became the passageway of the Phoenicians, so too, the Bechtmen, when the great American empire gathers into its civilizing caravan. Columbus could not longer say that the boy informed him when it disclosed the sun to him commanded, for the eclipse is a phenomenon known to the Indian as well as to the white man.

It is perchance this illusive imagination based on credulity that we wish to develop in the children? Surely not; it is not our wish that such a condition should continue. In fact, when the child "no longer believes in the stories" we are delighted and then we say "He is no longer a child." Sure must be the course of events and we expect it. The dog will bark when he will no longer believe these stories. Even so, we should ourselves, "What have we done to help?" What supports did we give to this feeble mind in order that it might strengthen itself?" The child overcomes all his obstacles in spite of our impulses which kept him back in a state of illusion and ignorance. The child overcomes himself and us, too, and reaches the goal whilst his inner forces of development and maturity lead. He, however, might say to us: "How you have made me suffer! Our friendships in the effort to develop were so great and yet you opposed us." How could it be otherwise if we tried to treat the game in such a way as to encourage the growth of the teeth just because of the characteristics of the newborn body is its lack of teeth? Would it not be like keeping the little body from growing because the characteristics of the preceding state was that of not being able to stand upright? In fact, we did act in this manner when we tried to have the child keep in his baby talk and so kept his language in a state of inferiority and lack of precision instead of helping him by letting him hear the sounds of words clearly articulated and having him see the movements of the lips. We copied his rudimentary language and repeated the primitive sounds he emitted, saying "How wow" and "Ta-ta," or else spoke with a lip or other defects characteristic of the beginning of an articulate language. So we detained him in this prehistoric period—a period full of difficulties—of great effort on the part of the child, holding him back in the arduous state of infancy.

This is what we are doing today to our so-called education of the imagination. We smother ourselves with the illusions, the ignorances, the errors of an immature mind, just as only a short time ago we delighted in the laughter of the baby who was being towed up and down—a thing which is now considered dangerous and is condemned by child hygiene. In short, it is we who are annoyed by the Christmas tales and the child's credulity. In admitting this we should recognize that we resemble somewhat that lady who was interested in a dispensary for poor children, but who kept saying, "If there were no more sick children I should be most happy." And it is so with us; if the credulity of children were no more, we should miss it greatly.

To retard one stage of development artificially and smother oneself thereby—in the ancient courts, when they were more intent to arrest criminality than to develop the intellect, and it is neither at basic nor its products. Creativity germinates in the state of intellectual darkness, and we are glad to supersede that stage. We cite credulity as evidence of the lack of civilization. For instance, here is an anecdote of the seventeenth century:

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not for the immature age, "We are not children." If we did not arrest the child's immaturity in the first stages, we would remain in an inferior stage, but instead would grow free from his growth, admiring the marvels of his perfecting of himself always in the way of greater conquests, then we would say of him as did Christ, when He said that he who would be perfect should become as a little child.

*That faith which is true is the basis of religion.* I have often heard told that the education of the imagination founded on the basis of fantasy prepares the soul of the child for religious education, and that an education based on reality, such as this method would desire, is too acid and dries up the spiritual springs. Such reasoning, however, cannot be shared by religious persons; for they well know that myth and faith are at opposite poles, and that the one which the mind cannot come to real as soon as the child, the other, the faith must accompany man to the end of life.

Religion is not the product of a fantastic imagination; it is the greatest reality, the only truth for the religious man. It is the fountain, the support, of his life. The man who is not religious is certainly not one lacking in imagination, but rather lacking in inner peace. In comparison with the religious man, he is less serene, less strong in misfortune, and not only that, but his courage vanishes in his own ideas. He is weaker, more capricious, and in vain does he cling to his imagination in order to construct a world outside the bounds of reality. Something within him calls out with David, "O Lord, my God, my soul thirsteth after Thee." But, if he be impelled by means of imagination alone to attain the goal of his true life, he may in a moment of supreme struggle feel his feet sinking in the quicksands.

When an apostle seeks to call a soul to a religion where he may rest his faltering foot on a rock, he has recourse to the feelings, not to the imagination; for he knows that he need create nothing, but has only to call in his aid and to that which abides in the depths of the soul. He knows that he must assume a life which has fallen into a stupor, which resembles a living body buried beneath the snow, and not construct a snow man which will melt in the sun's rays.

It is true that fantastic imagination has penetrated into religion, but as an error. For instance, in the Middle Ages plagues were very simply attributed to a direct action of Divine punishment. To-day they are attributed to the direct action of microbes. Papin's steam-engine caused people to think there was a diabolical agency; and these are precisely the prejudices which, like all fantasies, spring forth in the veil of ignorance. Not all religion is thus contaminated by fantastic superstition on foundations of ignorance, but there should find that savages were religious and the civilized were irreligious; whereas, on the contrary, savages have a religion which is fanatic, fragile, based in a great measure on the terror caused by the mysterious facts of nature, while civilized people have a strong, positive religion which grows ever purer as the science of truth, in penetrating the veil of nature, only exalts and makes clear the mystery.

Truth is the basis of every great artistic production of the imagination. Manifestations of art are also based on truth, even though they are the most glorious proofs of the heights with the most brilliant colour. Fine art and literary works attain greater heights in a measure as they draw their content from truth—not copying the truth, but constructing the original work of the imagination on truth. Nothing is more fanatical than Dante's poem, where the imagination of the poet roams through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and yet the imaginative beauty of the thought is gained through similes which reveal the poet as a patient observer of reality.

When Raphael wished to paint a type of Madonna, he wandered through parts of the Traverse, where the most beautiful women in Rome were to be found. It was there that


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